W. E. HEYGATE: TRACTARIAN CLERICAL NOVELIST

by GEORGE HERRING

In the 1830s a small group of Anglican clerics, mainly resident tutors and fellows of Oxford University, initiated a campaign for the revitalization of their Church, which they perceived to be threatened by secular forces. The inspiration for this was derived from the pre-Reformation roots of Anglicanism, specifically from a study of the fathers of the Early Church, supplemented by the post-Reformation Caroline divines of the seventeenth century. One of the main vehicles for propagating these ideas was the series known as the *Tracts for the Times*, which ran to ninety titles issued between 1833 and 1841, and from which this growing Oxford Movement derived its more popular title of 'Tractarian'.

In the 1840s and 1850s a number of these Tractarian clerics turned to the novel as another potent vehicle for the propagation of the ideals of their movement. Yet until recently these novels have not received the attention from modern scholars that their importance merits.[1] S. A. Skinner has recently produced a detailed study of the social and political thought of the Oxford Movement using the novels of William Gresley and F. E. Paget.[2] Skinner's self-imposed limitations, both in terms of subject matter and chronology, have resulted in the almost complete absence of any discussion in his book of the works of William Edward Heygate. Born in 1816, Heygate graduated from St John's College, Oxford in 1839, at a time when the Tractarian movement was rapidly gaining notoriety in the university and beyond. He was ordained the following year, subsequently holding a series of curacies in

[1] The only specific study, J. E. Baker, *The Novel and the Oxford Movement* (Princeton, NJ, 1932), is now very dated. More general studies such as Andrew Drummond, *The Churches in English Fiction: A Literary and Historical Study from the Regency to the Present Time, of British and American Fiction* (Leicester, 1950), or M. Maison, *Search Your Soul, Eustace: A Survey of the Religious Novel in the Victorian Age* (London, 1969), are either inaccurate or superficial. There is nothing for the Tractarians to compare in terms of scholarship with Elizabeth Jay, *The Religion of the Heart: Anglican Evangelicalism and the Nineteenth-Century Novel* (Oxford, 1979).

[2] S. A. Skinner, *Tractarians and the 'Condition of England': The Social and Political Thought of the Oxford Movement* (Oxford, 2004).

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a variety of rural parishes, until becoming an incumbent on the Isle of Wight in 1869. His first novel, *Godfrey Davenant: a Tale of School Life*, appeared in 1847, and in the following year he wrote one of the most significant Tractarian novels, *William Blake: or, the English Farmer.*[3] Heygate was also an important contributor to another genre, that of the manual or handbook for the practice of the clerical profession, at a time when formal pastoral training was still in its infancy. His most substantial work in this field was *Ember Hours* of 1857.[4]

This essay will restrict its focus to an interpretation of *William Blake* as a fictional realization of the advice proffered to Heygate's fellow clergy in *Ember Hours.* Using these works as exemplars of their respective genres, it will explore the idea that on one level Tractarian novelists had not only a rhetorical purpose common to much of their party's apologetic literature, but also a more narrowly didactic one in preparing the intending or recently ordained clergyman for his role as a model parson. Thus many of these novels had more than one specific target audience: not only literate Anglican parishioners who could be educated by them into the ideas of the movement, but also the clerical leaders who could be introduced to a range of pastoral techniques designed to make the movement a living parochial reality. Heygate himself hinted at something like this when he discussed the purposes of this type of fiction in the Preface to *William Blake*: among these was 'to give *advice* where it would otherwise not be possible'. In addition he asserted that the fiction 'pictures and makes vivid; it *realises*, and to all appearance renders possible ... virtues which would generally seem difficult, and almost unobtainable'.[5]

In their fiction the Tractarian clerical novelists almost invariably selected one of two broad approaches to their subject matter: historical or contemporary. Their historical tales were usually set either in the Early Church, with a special fondness for heroic stories of martyrdom, or in the seventeenth century, and in the latter case the heroes were often set in the mould of Caroline divines and the

3 W. E. Heygate, *Godfrey Davenant: A Tale of School Life* (London, 1847); idem, *William Blake; or, The English Farmer* (London, 1848).

4 See Anthony Russell, *The Clerical Profession* (London, 1980); this is based on a study of about one hundred such handbooks published between 1750 and 1875.

5 Heygate, *William Blake*, viii (italics mine).

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villains puritans, thus illuminating the sources of Tractarian inspiration. But, whatever the particular period, the 'moral message' was clear and comparisons with the nineteenth century sometimes crudely obvious. The alternative to this approach was the contemporary; and the setting for this was very often the nineteenth-century parish. This was the technique adopted by Heygate in *William Blake.* Set in the fictional village of Great Staunton with a population of six hundred souls, the narrative revolves around the efforts of the energetic new parson, Mr Lee – clearly a Tractarian, although never specifically identified as such – to influence one of the local farmers, William Blake, towards a higher consciousness of his spiritual and ecclesiastical duties, and consequently of his broader responsibilities to society.

To what extent, then, was the subject matter of the handbook echoed in fictional form in the novel? One of the hallmarks of the Tractarian clergy was a conviction that their movement was a necessary corrective to generations of neglect, manifest in the decayed state of much of the parochial life they observed in their Church. One of the radical changes required was thus in what Heygate termed the 'character' of the clergy.[6] By this he meant unremitting and heroic clerical sanctity. In *Ember Hours* he was at pains to contrast what he saw as the all too familiar concept of the parson derived from a discredited past model with the new type of cleric inspired by the ideals of the Oxford Movement. He implored his clerical readers to abandon the pursuits of the fashionable world: 'dancing and balls, and sporting, and all fashion in dress ... Do not all these things identify the parson more and more with the squirarchy?'[7] He used his first novel as a vehicle to portray this clergyman of the old type, more a squire than a parson, who thought more highly of his ancestral lands than of his priesthood, and then followed this with his first clerical handbook, *Probatio Clerica*, in which he argued that descent through saints and martyrs was better than any secular family tree.[8]

This theme of the lax parson at the heart of the decayed parish

6 See W. E. Heygate, *Ember Hours* (London, 1857), 50.

7 Ibid. 46–7.

8 Heygate, *Godfrey Davenant*, 2, 72–3; W. E. Heygate, *Probatio Clerica, or, Aids in Self-Examination to Candidates for Holy Orders, or for those Clergy who may desire them* (London, 1845), 21–2.

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then reappeared in the opening chapters of *William Blake*. Heygate described the incumbent, Mr Eccles, as a typical 'sporting' parson who could only attract thirty of his parishioners to his dreary Sunday services. In his unreformed parish the only true religion was to be found in the crowded meeting-house, attended by many out of ignorance rather than conviction; and in consequence the labouring classes in his parish turned to crime because of a neglected education, and the farmers saw nothing wrong in cheating one another provided they could avoid detection. Heygate made it clear that the reprehensible state of English society, of which this fictional parish was a microcosm, was due mainly to the failure of the parish church and its parson to fulfil their appointed roles.

Then Mr Lee arrived and the revolution began. The new incumbent was a man of a different order, revealed by the changes he made in the parsonage: all the sporting prints and luxurious furnishings were removed and replaced by a library as the most valuable commodity in the house, reflecting Heygate's view expressed in *Ember Hours* that the essence of a reformed clergy began with its education and a programme of spiritual reading. This was not undertaken for the sake of knowledge in itself but rather for what he called its 'moral effect'.[9] In the novel Heygate commented on the new parson's house: 'it contained nothing which would have excited the wonder of the poor, or made them afraid to sit down in their clergyman's house'.[10]

If the first evidence for this change in the tone of the parish was to be found in the parson and his house, the next would be announced by renovations in the church, its furnishings and its liturgy. Like all Tractarians Heygate regarded attention to these as fundamental, advising his clerical readers in *Ember Hours*:

> If our people see us indifferent to the treatment of the Church, to its decorations, and its music they must conclude either that we are slothful and careless, or else that we consider the outward service of GOD of no moment; which if they did believe they ought to think as lightly of us as we seem to do of GOD's honour.[11]

9 Heygate, *Ember Hours*, 5.
10 Heygate, *William Blake*, 60.
11 Heygate, *Ember Hours*, 41–2.

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Heygate recommended personal clerical supervision of all aspects of the liturgy, a careful and systematic approach to the preaching of sermons conforming to the pattern of readings found in the lectionary prescribed by the Prayer Book, and the keeping of a parochial journal.[12]

In his fiction Heygate was to illustrate a number of these objectives. In *William Blake* it was significant that Lee's first real opportunity to transform his parish came when he initiated repairs to his neglected church. Lee had friends willing to pay for a total restoration, which convinced the miserly vestry meeting. The principal difficulty arose, however, when Lee proposed removing the rented box pews and replacing them with open and free seating. This gave the author the opportunity to put into the mouth of Lee what were emerging as the common Tractarian objections to rented pews:

> Now one of the great objects for which we come to church is, that we may learn to feel that we are *not* superior to others, that we are all equal in God's sight, who is no respecter of persons. But, if the more wealthy have their pews, and the poorer are crowded here and there, as it may be, the richer members of the congregation find the church itself a means of perpetuating and increasing that trust in riches, that feeling of inequality which they come here intending, I trust, to shake off.[13]

Despite Lee's eloquence it was only the offer of £150 from the priest himself which persuaded the vestry to accept the abolition of a pewed church. However, completion of the restoration, including removal of the hated pews, the following year gave Lee the setting he required for the introduction of another Tractarian objective, the Daily Service.[14] Heygate then described the growing impact of the restored church and renewed liturgy on the congregation:

> The church, too, was a changed building, and so were the services. All was very plain and simple still, but strictly correct

[12] Ibid. 42–4.
[13] Heygate, *William Blake*, 50.
[14] Ibid. 134.

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> and in harmony with sacred objects. The font stood at the entrance. The altar caught the eye in passing up the nave. The singing and chanting were very fair; and, what is more, quite natural, simple, and heartfelt. The majority of the congregation knelt and rose at the proper times. The responses were deep and musical, following the tone of the choir. The earnest sermon was listened to with great attention. The offertory was responded to cheerfully, and as much as £2 collected from that small flock; and when the service was over the people left the church very slowly, and quietly dispersed.[15]

This transformation of the parishioners of the fictional Great Staunton had not been achieved, however, by the restoration alone. Alongside that, Lee was portrayed as adopting a number of pastoral techniques which Heygate had recommended in his clerical handbooks. The vital component of pastoral work was, in his opinion, the individual parishioner, each a unique entity with a particular mixture of problems, needs and talents. It was precisely to this neglect of personal visiting and confidential intercourse between the priest and the souls entrusted to him in the preceding generations that Heygate ascribed the deplorable state of relations which he described in *Ember Hours*:

> Nothing is known of the private habits of the parishioner; how often he prays; whether he prays at all; whether he reads his Bible, or whether he does not; whether he communicates in guilt, and eats and drinks his own damnation, or whether he partakes unto life eternal; whether he holds the Catholic faith, or is a heretic; whether he indulges in private sins destructive to the soul, not knowing their enormity; whether he retains the sinful gain, or restores; whether he is at enmity, or in charity; whether he wars wisely with his sins, or through want of counsel fails, or does not war at all.[16]

For Heygate the Tractarian, one answer to this spiritual neglect was the practice of confession.[17] However, he was conscious that something less formal would need to be the standard practice, and that

[15] Ibid. 184.
[16] Heygate, *Ember Hours*, 25.
[17] Ibid. 25.

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a clerical understanding of the spiritual lives of parishioners would commence in childhood, beginning at school and then progressing through confirmation preparation and night schools.[18] He was also aware that the system that he described was very much an ideal; in the majority of cases the neglect of the parochial system had resulted in 'persons who have grown up in ignorance and carelessness, and openly godless and evil livers'.[19] Once again individual attention was the answer; but in the absence of a progressive system in place from childhood the parson would have to wait for, or cultivate, specific opportunities which could be exploited to gain an opening into the soul, such as visiting after a family joy or sorrow. But above all he identified times of sickness as a unique pastoral opportunity: 'By sickness God singles a man out of the world,' he wrote in *Ember Hours*, 'separates him from his fellows, takes him into the wilderness, pleads with him, shows him to himself and Himself to him. Sickness is isolation for repentance'.[20] How, then, did he illustrate this in his fictional writing?

It is notable that in *William Blake* the occasion for the first individual and private exchanges between the young farmer and the rector occurred when the former's betrothed had to be removed from the village when she was feared to have consumption. Blake's heart and mind became unhinged, and gave Lee his opportunity for intervention and subsequent influence. The farmer was impressed by the parson's kindness, reinforced by the Sunday sermon on the topic of the relationship between the pastor and his people and imploring the latter to come to Lee at any time. Blake did so, coming to the rectory for the first time. And so one thing was enabled to lead to another; the farmer eventually became a regular communicant after lengthy and carefully organized preparation involving both personal instruction and a considerable list of reading material. Then the subsequent return of Blake's betrothed, Ellen, fully restored to health, gave the rector a further opportunity to proffer advice on a range of personal, household and charitable duties, accompanied by yet another extensive bibliography. But, however detailed the fictional account, the one thing missing was a description of formal confession. What might be acceptable in

[18] Ibid. 27–8.
[19] Ibid. 29.
[20] Ibid. 36.

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a handbook written explicitly for fellow clergy was clearly not possible in a novel in 1848 designed for a wider audience at a time when Tractarians were under close scrutiny for any Jesuitical practices.

In his choice of William Blake's occupation, however, Heygate was on firmer ground. When this novel was written there were about a quarter of a million farmers in Britain, with several times that number engaged in agriculture, which remained the largest single source of employment, and almost half the population was still categorized as rural.[21] In selecting this form of employment for his eponymous hero Heygate had made a deliberate and informed choice. The statistical evidence further demonstrates that, like so many of their clerical colleagues, Tractarians had a strong tendency to gravitate to rural parishes in these decades. Of more than six hundred Tractarian incumbents active between 1840 and 1870 over half were in parishes of fewer than a thousand souls; Great Staunton might have been a fictional creation, but in that sense it was firmly anchored in reality.[22]

There were also other reasons beyond the demographic for Heygate to make William Blake a farmer. In the novel he asserted that 'this little fruit of rural parochial work' had been composed in the conviction that 'the farmers of England are an important class, and one hardly recognising its privileges, power, and consequent responsibility'. If each could be aroused to this consciousness he believed that individually he 'might be an anchor and a principle of *steadfastness*' to the country as a whole, and 'more useful by far, in his quiet circle, than many bustling men in larger spheres and of greater pretensions'.[23] Yet Heygate was equally aware that this ideal role was very far indeed from realization in 1848, and the picture of the agricultural community that Heygate painted in his novel was a far from flattering one. Nine years later, in *Ember Hours*, he was still lamenting the deplorable moral condition of society, with dishonesty rife among all sections of the community.[24]

[21] See B. A. Holderness, 'The Victorian Farmer', in G. E. Mingay, ed., *The Victorian Countryside*, 2 vols (London, 1981), 1: 227–43. The statistics are derived from the 1851 census.

[22] George Herring, *What Was the Oxford Movement?* (London, 2002), 76.

[23] Heygate, *William Blake*, v, ix–x, 13.

[24] Heygate, *Ember Hours*, 37–8.

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Not surprisingly, then, one of the lengthy dialogues which took place between Blake and Lee in the novel dealt precisely with this problem. Labourers' wages were not rising enough to keep pace with the price of wheat and hence bread: what were the responsibilities of farmers in this situation? Lee asserted that 'no man has a right to make a time of scarcity and suffering a means of private advancement, by withholding that which he can afford to sell'.[25] The farmer thus had a moral duty to sell his produce at a fair price so that the poor, whether rural or urban, might be able to afford bread.

Thus in both *Ember Hours* and *William Blake* Heygate advocated and then illustrated broadly the same methodology for restoring the rural parochial system utilizing the existing social structure, and so to that extent the novel could indeed be seen as the fictional realization of the manual. Problems, whether moral or liturgical, could be rectified by what Tractarians such as Heygate referred to as the 'Church system', a coherent and interconnected set of ideas and practices originating from the objective authority of a visible Church in contrast to the more subjective opinions of individual Christians. This system could educate key groups such as farmers into a right conception of their duties to both God and their neighbours, resulting in better instruction and fairer wages for the labourers, and encouragement for all to attend a church no longer a half-empty preaching box but rather restored as a true house of prayer. Then the ills of English society that Heygate isolated and analysed in both books could begin to be removed, and the Established Church emerge in its role as the sanctifier of souls and the humanizer of minds and bodies.

What must also be noted, however, are the limitations, both artistic and historical, in the Tractarian novels and (to a lesser extent) in the manuals. The subject matter of the fictional works was invariably formulaic, and the precise plots often contrived and laboured. Heygate was hardly alone among Tractarian novelists in devising a fiction around the theme of a neglected parish rejuvenated by the arrival of an energetic Tractarian parson. In addition his creation, Mr Lee, on several occasions during the course of the

[25] Heygate, *William Blake*, 126.

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tale conveniently discovered wealthy friends able and willing to pay for his various expensive schemes of improvement.

But whatever the creative weaknesses of the fictions, more important for the historian is the reality that lay behind them. Was the picture of the reformed young farmer, William Blake, an accurate one? Did the real Tractarian clergy succeed in any demonstrable way in convincing their local representatives of the Victorian rural middle classes of the truth of their religious ideals and persuade them to become good practising members of their particular parishes?

Sadly, the surviving evidence points in a negative direction. In the middle decades of the nineteenth century farmers 'were the active capitalists in English agriculture: they rented farms, conducted farming operations, employed labour, and received the profits. Having transformed the agricultural economy, and taken on the economic role of the middle class, they also acquired its distinctive social role, and transformed agrarian social relations as well'.[26] While it may be too sweeping to describe all farmers in the 1840s as middle class, what is true is that a growing number of them were aspiring to the same level of material comfort as their urban counterparts, and abandoning traditional practices such as housing unmarried agricultural labourers in the farmhouse with the immediate family, mirroring the Victorian concern for clearer class segregation. It was this expanding rural middle class, the farmers and their natural counterparts the village tradesmen, who in reality confronted the Tractarian clergy with a fundamental social and religious problem: how to persuade this newly enriched class to adopt more paternalistic social concepts, and at the same time to become practising Churchmen?

The Tractarians shared with other clergy a growing concern for the consequences of the hardening social divisions within English society. Heygate was himself a typical representative of these worried parsons and repeated many of their fears in his writings, whether fictional or otherwise, including a belief that if something was not done to lessen the growing separation of the classes then the only result would be the disintegration of society itself.[27]

[26] James Obelkevich, *Religion and Rural Society: South Lindsey 1825–1875* (Oxford, 1976), 46.

[27] See Frances Knight, *The Nineteenth-Century Church and English Society*

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It was a particular concern of the Tractarians that this class system was having a deleterious effect on religious practice. In his novel *Charles Lever* William Gresley described the middle classes in the fictional town of Lexington as basically conservative, but then noted that 'conservatism without a higher principle is a feeble safeguard of virtue'.[28] In another novel he related the attitude of one of his characters, significantly a shopkeeper: 'he professed to be a member of the Church, and on the score of lounging into his pew about once a month when the service was half over, considered himself an excellent Churchman'.[29] W. J. E. Bennett, the Tractarian vicar of Frome, composed a fictional dialogue between a farmer and a tradesman, the latter claiming that he could not go to church on Ascension Day because he could not afford it, while the farmer argued that he must also absent himself in order to look after his crops.[30]

It was clear, then, that in devising a plot around a farmer's moral and religious progress, Heygate was reflecting widespread Tractarian clerical anxieties and hopes. Yet when in reality they attempted the kind of reforming programme portrayed in *William Blake*, itself derived from the clerical handbooks, what they almost invariably encountered was not compliance but rather hostility; it was the farmers and tradesmen who were often their most bitter opponents. William Butler, the vicar of Wantage from 1846, kept an almost daily record in his parish diaries of his struggle to turn hostile and suspicious farmers and tradesmen into good Churchmen and social paternalists. The results were almost universally discouraging. In 1850, after four years of labour, he noted 'the deadness of the tradesmen and farmers to all serious matters whether religious or secular'.[31] He regularly bemoaned the laxity of the local middle classes when it came to the observance of

(Cambridge, 1995), for a discussion of the similarities between all clerical parties with regard to these issues, and also my forthcoming book on the Tractarian parochial revival, provisionally entitled *Rebuilding the Ruined Shrines: The Tractarian Parochial Revival*.

[28] William Gresley, *Charles Lever: or, The Man of the Nineteenth Century* (London, 1841), 86.

[29] William Gresley, *Portrait of an English Churchman* (London, 1838), 285.

[30] W. J. E. Bennett, 'Ascension Day – A Dialogue between a Farmer and a Tradesman', *The Old Church Porch* 4/5 (1 May 1860), 74.

[31] Reading, Berkshire County Record Office, MS Wantage Parish Diaries, Add. MSS D/P, 143, 28/1: 3 February 1850.

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holy days, and frequently criticized their parsimony where alms and church collections were concerned.[32] Butler made determined efforts to persuade the farmers and tradesmen to take responsibility for the machinery of local government. In this he was also far from successful, as he noted their reluctance to hold any public office for fear that their decisions would be unpopular and so damage their profits.[33] Finally, in 1855, after more than nine years of effort, he discovered that one of his most respectable tradesmen, a churchwarden, had committed adultery. In the privacy of his diary this occasioned a particularly fierce outburst of frustration:

> The real truth is, that our tradesmen, the representatives of that wonderful middle class, which newspapers and officials flatter and imagine to be the most capable of people to rule the country etc., etc., putting all local concerns into their hands, religion, education, sanitary reform, provision for the poor, are a thoroughly ignorant, ungodly set. There are no doubt, and thank God for it, bright exceptions, but the majority care for nothing except keeping up respectability and making money. They smile or sneer at every kind of sin which does not affect life or property. I do not hesitate to say all but entirely without God to the world, i.e. they refer nothing to His Presence, or their duty to Him, but only consider how far it affects their pocket, pleasure, or reputation.[34]

Thus a review of the evidence must inevitably lead to the conclusion that the portrait of William Blake remained at best aspirational, and equally that Tractarian fiction was in many respects highly idealized.

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[32] Ibid. 28/3: 12 May 1858; 28/2: 22 April 1855.
[33] Ibid. 28/3: 12 April 1858.
[34] Ibid. 28/2: 1 December 1855.

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